

CHILDHOOD IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY THE BARBARIAN THINKING OF CHILDREN AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE WORLD OF LIFE

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1. Introduction

Setting out a lineal path that combs through all Maurice MerleauPonty works in which he speaks about childhood or about child development is not an easy task. Sometimes as a metaphor, other times as a concrete period in the individual's genesis, the reference that the French philosopher makes about children often seems to go in different directions; neither opposites, nor excluding. Only two different views (or two alternative utilizations) around the features and functions of child thinking, interrelated, mutually nourish and complete. These two faces that allude to the parts that together constitute a reality that overtakes them. On one side, in the texts more linked to psychology as *Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant. Cours de Sorbonne (1949/1952)*, childhood is presented as the historically neglected phase that shows up in the frame of phenomenology as a space to be vindicated; as a period with features of its own and that has to be necessarily differentiated from other phases of development. In contrast, in other works, as *Phenomenology of Perception* or *La Nature*.

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Notes Cours du Collège de France, the child acquires the image of a figure, of a way of being, expressing the relaunching itself of an individual in history.

The childhood in the theory of MerleauPonty has not been a subject sufficiently explored by those who dedicate themselves to its study, for which the antecedents on this subject in particular are scarce. For Etienne Bimbenet, children's thinking in MerleauPonty expresses "the phenomenological return to the things themselves, and the chronological return to the past of objective thought" (Bimbenet, 2002: 65). Childhood is then installed as a privileged moment of human development, which represents "a stricter proximity to nature" (*ibid.*, 66), where objective thought has not yet been falsified by the arrival of adulthood. Bimbenet takes up the problem of child egocentrism of which Piaget speaks, to compare it under the light of the *Cours de Sorbonne*. There, the child lives with the certainty of being part of a plural and intersubjective world. Bimbenet inverts the conditions in which the discussion of childhood in MerleauPonty is usually involved, to make this topic not a secondary concern in the philosophical path of the phenomenologist, but rather as a relevant aspect of his theory that can shed light on the very genesis of the acquisition of perceptual habits.

On the other hand, Saint Aubert analyses the "discovery" of the piagetian topology by MerleauPonty, from the reading of *La représentation de l'espace chez l'enfant*. Piaget describes the infantile spatiality from five relationships: closeness, separation (or segregation), order, involvement and continuity. He will argue that the evolution of the spatiality of the child is closely linked "to the progression of the competence of his hands and his exploration strategies" (Saint Aubert, 2006: 235). MerleauPonty will integrate this approach to the perception of the perceived world and of the body itself. For Saint Aubert (2006), MerleauPonty "understands topological space as primordial" and adds that it "is the space of 'the thing itself'" invested by the body itself "as a total part" (*ibid.*, 237). From this interpretation, it can be observed how MerleauPonty receives Piaget's texts on spatiality as concerning the spatiality of the body itself.

In this paper, an analysis will be made on some of the works of MerleauPonty, in which the phenomenologist provides a description of childhood or the child image that reports relevant aspects to his theory. Childhood will not only be a methodological interest object in his psychology studies, but also that primal advancement of experience – the mere potentiality yet not thrown (or rather, having not yet been thrown) into the world, where everything will, necessarily, have sense.

2. Childhood in the Cours de Sorbonne: restore the child to history

The methodological proposal presented by MerleauPonty in *Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant. Cours de Sorbonne (1949/1952)* will try to restore or place again the child in the sociohistorical context where it belongs. Just like women or “primitive people”, children should be restored to history and be considered acting members in historical processes that will confer them diverse features. For MerleauPonty, we do not have to set something like a “child condition”, that is, a mindset typical of the child. He identifies certain “originality” in the child consciousness, so setting features typical of childhood would be ignoring this fact and, at the same time, presupposing a mental structure inaccessible a priori to adults.

From this conception of scientific endeavour and spotlighting the epistemological consequences caused by the effacement of the historical particularities of the individuals, MerleauPonty considers that the description of the child made by the adult is the expression of the relationship that the latter institutes with the first, and not a naturalistic description of the underlying mechanisms. In *Méthode en psychologie de l'enfant* (a course of *Cours de Sorbonne*), the child’s consciousness is, primarily, opaque to the view of an adult located completely out of it. The philosopher criticizes certain “realistic” attempt in the childhood analysis, which “cuts, separates (and) distinguishes between exterior and interior, situation and response” (M.P., 2001: 476). There are neither organisms without situation, nor moments over the life of an organism where it would not be immersed in a determined situation. In child psychology, what MerleauPonty calls “atomist conception” is impossible and takes out what truth represents in the life of a child, since it constitutes an “immovable cut of what development is” in a child (*ibid.*, 476). This discipline must constitute, then, “through relativity”, integrating, as subject of study, the child environment and the relations he is immerse in. It is necessary for MerleauPonty to reintegrate the child to the set of social and historical environment where he lives and to which he reacts; these features do nothing but disable the naturalistic position or “a priori” about childhood.

What are the features of childhood for the French phenomenologist? First, MerleauPonty speaks about *child polymorphism*. In the child coexist very diverse possibilities that make him resemble a neurotic, as long as multiple features inhabit in him, in a subject whose cultural root has not yet been defined. The child must not be conceived either as an absolute other or like us, but as an individual in constituting process, open to all possibilities offered by his environment. LeviStrauss generalizes this idea

by affirming, according to MerleauPonty, that “there is no child mindset, but a child polymorphism” (*ibid.*, 470). When the child is not integrated to the culture, it could manifest conducts that may seem primitive or pathological. The physical and intellectual developments of a child are not the only factors conditioning his access to the world of culture, but also his imitative abilities utilized to “copy” adult’s conducts; the child acquires habits proper of his group using “quasidramatic means” (*ibid.*, 468) of imitation. Polymorphism refers to the merleauPontian negative of “crystallizing” the child, conferring immovable attributes. Many of them, he affirms, are nothing but the result of the historical path and upbringing received by women throughout time. At first, libido has nothing to do with sexual instinct, but will call “sexual” to these first conducts since they are related to the difference of sexes, without knowledge of genital mechanism. Sexuality comes in the life of a child as anticipation. The libido circulating by different ways in the child psychosexual development is not necessarily meant to acquire a sexual significance. The initial libido, according to MerleauPonty, “should be undetermined” (*ibid.*, 333), given that all individuals are polymorph perverse. Libido indeterminacy (that will take a more precise path with the castration produced by the closure of the Oedipus complex) is one of the notes that could define the nature interrogative and open to a future, described by MerleauPonty.

Second, the *prematuring phenomenon* (*ibid.*, 470) refers to the possibility of the child of living the conflicts or certain episodes of his life, before the development of the physical or intellectual powers required to do so. From the beginning, the child possesses a determined culture, since he starts at a very early stage to have a relation with his peers as of the intervention of cultural objects and institutions. The utilization of certain utensils (as the baby bottle during the lactation period) or the adaptation to socially regulated behaviors (such as breastfeeding, which features vary from one social group to other), give account of the insertion of the child into a particular culture, with which he will interact and build determined standards of the “usual” or ordinary. The sleep cycle² (another phenomenon that is many times considered as merely “natural” or biological) is nothing but the ordering of the sleeping and waking periods in the heart of a determined culture.

Finally, the *identification relation*, established between the child and the caretaker adult. For MerleauPonty, the child sees himself in the other,

2 See: MerleauPonty, M. (1995). *La nature. Cours du collège de France*, p. 196.

as much as the others see themselves in him. This identification relation creates tension between its participants; typical tension between who is the “model” and who cannot adapt to it. MerleauPonty distinguishes a double imitation phenomenon: on one hand, from the children to their caretakers (for whom adult age represent a sort of “perfection”) idealized as that moment when they will be able to do what they want; and on the other hand, there is an identification from the parents to the children as they revive their childhood by taking care of their sons or daughters. The double identification phenomenon between the child and the adult subscribes the methodological starting point of MerleauPonty, in which the child cannot be defined a priori of his social, historical and cultural environment. This double identification implies an idealization of the other’s lived moment: for the children, adulthood is the moment of continuous joy, of perfection, when all problems disappear; in contrast, adults (MerleauPonty refers to the mother in particular) revive their own childhood with the children.

3. The original interlacing: the child as a place inhabited by many places

The world opens up in front of the child’s view in a different way from that of the adults. A body still being built, pushing to be split off from the body of the caretakers and the exit of Oedipus complex, partially closes to give way to other transformations. The discussion is announced in *Phenomenology of Perception*) to be extended in *Psychologie et pédagogie de l’enfant. Cours de Sorbonne (1949/1952)*, reporting about the relevancy of the child figure and what revelations his perceptive faculties will have for the French philosopher.

In *Phenomenology of perception*, MerleauPonty states that the child lives in a world equally accessible for all, where there is no difference between his perspective and the one of those around him; the child “has no awareness of himself, nor of others, as private subjectivities, does not suspect we all are, and he is, limited to a certain point of view about the world” (M.P., 1984: 366). This undifferentiation of the points of view is nothing but a mention of the indiscernible nature of corporeality in early childhood. These unclear boundaries express the plasticity of the corporeal scheme, including within its boundaries, the body of their primary caretakers itself. This first mention of infantile subjectivity as full openness to others and as a dimension crossed by the environment will have a meaning, above all political, which will become flesh in a call to return to that openness

towards others from which adulthood seems to distance us. In this way, it returns us to that first state where we do not exclude the other but transform it into a constitutive part of our being. About this, MerleauPonty states:

Actually, it is necessary that, in a way, children are right against adults or against Piaget, and barbaric thoughts or first childhood continue being an indispensable capital below the adults. (...) With cogito begins the fight of consciousness where each one, as Hegel says, pursues the death of the other. For the fight to begin, for each consciousness could suspect the alien presences that denies, it is necessary they have a common ground and they remember their peaceful coexistence in the child's world. (*ibid.*, 366)

The child is this omniscient individual that seems to embrace all possible perspectives and, in turn, is traversed by them. In one of MerleauPonty examples, the child believes that his dreams are accessible by everyone sleeping in the room. The world for the child is “the vague place of all experiences”, embracing from true objects to “individual and instantaneous ghosts” (*ibid.*, 356). The distinction of different perspectives and points of view experienced by adults, is not a real problem for children, who are still immerse in the peace brought by the syncretism typical of a scheme that has not yet consolidated. The child “does not have the science of points of view” (*ibid.*, 366), since he still does not note that each individual thought is private, and we can only have access to them (or to part of them) by the exteriorizations made by them. Simultaneously, the world and everything happening within are for the child, in MerleauPonty's words, “quasimaterial” to the point that “a child asks himself why looks, when crossing, do not break” (M.P., 2001: 366). In taking Piaget's theory, it is around the age of twelve when the child would reach rational thinking; thus, discovering himself “as sensitive consciousness and intellectual consciousness, as point of view about the world and as call to overcome this point of view, to build an objectivity at the level of judgement” (M.P., 1984: 366). The “truths of rationalism” appear with all their weight. For MerleauPonty, Piaget makes the mistake of thinking about childhood as a degraded adulthood, as the place of chaos and nonsense. Also, that at the age of twelve the rational thinking comes and with it, all contradictions disappear. Facing this idea, MerleauPonty retrieves the “barbaric thinking” of the child, who remains in the happy coexistence with other thinking, without struggling to eliminate them. With the coming of rational thinking the fight begins, where every consciousness pursues the “death of the other” (M.P., 2001: 367). For this fight to occur the individual must, according to MerleauPonty, remember the first phase of indiscernibility where all consciousnesses were part of a common ground.

In *Phenomenology of perception*, MerleauPonty clearly describes the dynamic from which the child makes a way among the world spectacle to start ordering it. In that beginning still mute, the child finds himself lost in the vastness of sensations opening in front of his eyes, and in that pure possibility of discovery. It is presented as the privileged beholder of a world still not restricted by the boundaries of the senses:

It is true that, often, other's knowledge clarifies our knowledge: the outer spectacle reveals to the child the sense of his own impulses, since it proposes an aim. But the example would pass unnoticed if it doesn't run into the child's inner possibilities (...) The communication or the understanding of gestures is achieved with the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and of the intentions, legible in other's behaviour. (M.P., 1984: 202)

The quoted fragment references to a passage of Henri Wallon (one of the most recurrent backgrounds in MerleauPonty's work), who in *Kinesthesia and the Visual Body Image in the Child*³ uses a quote of Karl Marx to report the dialectic and intersubjective constitution of the body of the child:

Man begins to reflect himself in another man as in a mirror. Only when he has, in front of the individual Paul, a similar behavior he has in front of him, the individual Peter begins to be aware of him as a man. This quote of Marx expresses very well this fluctuation from him to other and of the perceived image in other in him, which is not only a moral or social reality, but also an essential psychological process. (Calmels, 2000: 61)

This phrase, with clear political and moral connotations, is taken by Wallon as the dynamic itself of subjectivity autoconstruction from the body of the others. We exist amid that constant dialog with our environment with which we establish, from the very beginning, a tonic and emotional dialogue, based on the changes of muscle tone, interchange that satisfies the postural needs of the baby when getting from an adult the first postures in the act of giving. This is postulated as the possibility condition (along with the satisfaction of the biological basic needs of the baby) in the construction of every individual. Then, the dialectic is, for Wallon, the dynamic that structures and defines the subjectivity of the baby and will rise for MerleauPonty in the dynamic itself of the being in the world.

3 See: Wallon, Henri (1965). "Kinesthesia e imagen visual del propio cuerpo en el niño", *Estudios sobre psicología genética de la personalidad*, Buenos Aires: Lautaro.

4. Opening towards expression: the child as primary silence

For MerleauPonty, “all those who transform into words a certain silence” (*ibid.*, 201), this is, the child that is learning to talk and the writer, are giving an account of the contingent of the human communication. The child owns that contingency, manipulates it, makes a fruitful use of it and adapts it to his needs when referring to the things of the world. The “primary silence” from which everything could be born, expresses the pure communicative potentiality of the child, that capacity of being able to refer, even to those that disappear in adulthood. They can create communicative situations in the middle of silence, interpret sounds as constituents of a communicative process or reading in them a missing musicality. This point is addressed by MerleauPonty in the section “The perception of the other and the dialogue” in *La prose du monde*, where he will try to recover that first word, the conqueror word (*parole conquérante*), that will enable the language from the significant potentiality of the gesture.

In communication, we are never in the passive subject role: when I talk, it will be in the middle of the interchange with another individual; and when I listen too, since I will talk later. “As speaking subjects, we continue, resume a single effort, older than us, where we are integrated one and the other”, so the word will not be other than this “anticipation and resumption” (M.P., 1971: 200), as long as “the acquired significances” will contain the new ones as a “trace or horizon” (*ibid.*, 183). Likewise, the style of the expression that will cover the words that have been said or the words in a book, cause “the general environment of interpreting” (*ibid.*, 184) the world they refer to. In *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*, MerleauPonty states “that the perceived world (...) already implies the expressive function” (*ibid.*, 45). In these courses, the phenomenologist deepens the linking between the act of perceiving and expression, dynamic identified in the circularity of the function of the perceived word, whose perception will remain as sediment to grasp the world that contains it and will be the trace from which the new worlds could open. Then, the expression will be defined by the philosopher like “the property that a phenomenon has, by its inner agency, to make other (phenomenon) known, that was not or even never has been given” (*ibid.*, 48). For this reason, “the function of expression (*parole*) itself” is described by him as “the power of saying overall more than what it says word by word” (*ibid.*, 182). The episode narrated by MerleauPonty in *Phenomenology of perception* (1984), about a child with his grandmother at the bed story time, could illustrate this fact: the story, daily told by his grandmother in a determined

situation and using certain objects to do it (her glasses, the book arranged in a specific way, etc.) magically “appears” for the child when that narrative situation is rebuilt. The narration begins to be told when the situation that facilitates it is arranged. “The story is a world and it has to be a way of making it magically appear putting on glasses and leaning into a book” (M.P., 1984: 410). This way, language will make sense for a child when he could link it to a particular situation, and until then, the situatedness of experience will be something indefinite, unable to evoke anything. Then, the word spoken (or the use of it), will be the vehicle of that operation by which a world will open from the horizon of significance that underlies it. This way, in *Phenomenology of perception* (1984), the child is presented as the beginning itself of the *cogito* that is fulfilled in the moment it is expressed and as the beginning of the human being, unitized and split from other that always seems to mix with his body. “Even as thinking subject”, states MerleauPonty, “I am still this first perception, the sequence of life itself that this (perception) will open” (*ibid.*, 416). This first “vision” waits to “be set and explicated by perceptive exploration and word” (*ibid.*, 413).

Equally, the expressive world of the child offers us other aspects of the act of expressing itself, where the aesthetic dimension crosses, like in the artist, with the temporal dimension. We are immersed, MerleauPonty states, in the “objectivist illusion” according to which “the act of expressing, in its regular or essential way, consists, given a significance, in building a system of signs in a way that each element of the significance corresponds to an element of the significant, this is, to represent” (M.P., 1971: 205). The planimetric perspective intends to offer a “notation of the world that would be applicable for all”, from which “the lived perspective is set” and whilst it builds and image that could be translated as any other point of view, “it is the image of a world in itself” (*ibid.*, 207). The “deformation” of this kind of perspective produce is “systematic” and applies to all elements of drawing, it produces the illusion of seeing things from “the knowledge that may have of a human vision a God that does not immerse in finitude” (*ibid.*, 207). The child’s drawing, instead, expresses another way of approaching our environment, no longer from this attempt of grabbing a universal point of view, but our relationship with the world. Also, it does not try to rebuild, for MerleauPonty, an objective point of view, but to point out our contact with things, as they call us in a way. The child expression proposes us a way of “elliptic” expression, according to which, when a determined spectacle is represented, all things that intervene in it are invoked, placing them in a same level of coexistence. “All the elements of the spectacle are pointed out without error and without overlapping.” (*ibid.*, 206) In child

drawing, the presence of our body in the world is revealed by “the mark of our finitude” and “the secret substance of the object.” (*ibid.*, 209) Children put all the parts of a story at the same level, this is, all moments, actions and characters involved in a story are summoned in a single image. Children conjugate the evolution of a story in a single level, that connects them and make the relations between its parts visible. Far from “the reasonable ‘adult’, who thinks about time as a series of overlapped temporary spots” (*ibid.*, 209), the child puts us facing the temporal plexus itself, facing the elliptic dynamic of the lived time where the present refers us, like a beam, to the past and to the future.

Child temporality, remaining as background in the children’s drawing analysis, will be another relevant point that MerleauPonty will take from the theory of Piaget: if we analyse the way in which children experience time, it could be observed the cultural nature of this dimension. Perception is defined by MerleauPonty as “a machine of living” the time (*ibid.*, 190), from which temporality is given to us as a cultural setting. He also adds that: “My body is not only an apparatus of making attachments in space”, but it will also make attachments in time” (*ibid.*, 190). Time will be, in the end, what organizes, to some extent, the perceptive field (*champ*). The child, in the still fluctuating construction of his own past, gives account of the conventional and cultural nature of the “time marking machines”. The “yesterday” which are months in the younger, or the “tomorrow” that will be in several days, render account of that, of an episodic disorder that contacts us with an experience not yet ordered by a cultural setting.

5. The birth as institution: opening of a field of experience

With the arrival of a child, a new story begins, a new record of experience opens facing our body; the whole environment resignifies and, with that, the story of who take part of this new sense opening also acquires a new signification. Besides, a new “record” is opened, a new story “is founded”. With the birth, a “new possibility of situation” is opened (M.P., 1984: 415) that it cannot be considered merely as an objective fact between others, but it is linked to the past and to the perspectives of a future. To the phenomenologist, birth compromises a future while it sets up as a situation which will necessarily have an outcome. With the arrival of a child, “the world received a new level of significance” (*ibid.*, 415), in which the objective space acquires a different significance: the windows of the building, which in the past were only sources of light and a space for contact with the outside world, turn into dangerous spaces that should be

away from the newcomer; a certain outfit is covered with the veil of some memory related to the child's birth; a room will be the actual place of the beginning of the family. About this, MerleauPonty supports:

In the house where a child is born, all the objects change their sense, they expect from him an undetermined treatment yet, someone else, someone different is there, a new story, short or long, was just founded, a new record, was just opened. (*ibid.*, 416)

This new look that is opened with the birth itself is pure institution, given that it opens a new record of substitution that will impregnate with a certain sense the course of the child's experiences. In *The institution in the personal and public history* (2012), birth appears as an instituting or sense giving event, from which other events will have a determined significance. First, let's remember the definition of institution developed by MerleauPonty:

[it means] setting in an experience (or in a built apparatus) of dimensions (in the general Cartesian sense: system of reference) in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense and form a continuation, a story. (M.P., 2012: 8)

However, for whom is an institution the event of birth? In the courses about institution, birth seems to be another instituting event in the life of an individual, like the Oedipus complex during childhood or falling in love during adolescence. In *Phenomenology of perception*, the ambivalent nature of this event is expressed, where the link itself of the individuals in the world and the overlapping and resignifying of personal stories between each other could be seen. Birth is not only a sense giving event for the individual that arrives to the world, but also for all the ones taking part of his experience environment. Likewise, in *La Nature. Notes Cours du Collège de France*, the child is for MerleauPonty a "new field" of consciousness (M.P., 1995: 271), not emerged from his mother's consciousness, but of the "emptiness disposition", because of "irruption of a new field coming from the interworld (*entremonde*)",⁴ which is not an effect of the predecessors, although at the beginning it depends entirely on them. There is not a "stickiness of souls" between the mother and the child. About that, MerleauPonty says:

4 The *Entremonde* refers to the existence of a "world" (environment or group) within other.

It is a body that produces the stickiness and that perceives when the actions of the world reach him. There is no descent of a soul in a body, but rather an emergence of a life in his cradle, caused vision. (*ibid.*, 280)

This way, the coming to the world of a baby is considered by the philosopher as opening to a new experience, but at the same time, as a new sense courses within the experience of the others. Birth is the overlapping or linking (*empiètement*) about which MerleauPonty will elaborate, in *La prose du monde*, according to which the identification of the other is produced in the world itself, in the crossing of the corporeality and moving possibilities with the others. With birth, the individual starts to take part of a determined vital tissue; it is pure sense relaunch, from the others and in between them.

1. Conclusion

The child appears in MerleauPonty's phenomenology not only as the subject of study of psychology (elusive, complex, opaque to the view of the adult), but also as an image quasimetaphoric of the genesis of the perceptual act itself; the pristine and ideal stage of the corporeal organization of an individual that seems to arrive to this world only with few tools that determine his openness. Childhood, then, is not only a period of psychogenetic development of an individual, but also a quasiliterary figure, poetic, that places us in the beginning of the dynamic of being thrown in the world. The child is the image of that field, full of peace, where all views cross without touching each other. Reflection of the plexus of possibilities that open in the perception event, the child is the world itself, since all possibilities of the individual are not yet a realized fit. Childhood as a representative image of the wild experience hidden by the halo of scientificism and as a concrete phase in the psychophysical development of an individual, will prompt to, in the work of the philosopher, a new conception of human subjectivity, crossed by the world and in constant dialog with it. The child relaunches itself to sense within his own story, the beginning of accumulation of significances that link with the ones that surround him and that will acquire, from there, a new sense. He is the beginning, the pristine phase of sedimentation dynamic that will later replicate in the story itself. It is the incarnated and alive expression that shows us the link we have with others and which we constantly avoid; it is the time that expresses itself and that finds in the not yet articulated space, without mediation of conventional representations, a place to shelter.

The child described in *Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant. Cours de Sorbonne (1949/1952)*, is a child completely permeated by the environment that receives him: even those behaviours we consider natural are mediated by culture. Functions like feeding or Oedipus complex are, in the heart of this courses, a sample of a determined group or community, and not universal phenomena that replicate in the same way in dissimilar places. In *La nature. Cours du collège de France*, MerleauPonty takes the experiences of Gesell,⁵ to explore the ambivalence of the body between the worlds of nature and culture. For Gesell, the animal body is defined as a “take” (*prise*) or occupation of the outer world, therefore there will be no difference between the body itself and the behaviour, “because the body is defined as a place of behaviour” (M.P., 1995: 196). In the case of a premature baby, analysed by Gesell, he describes how the sleep cycle, altered in the beginning, is “acquired”, “as if the child has learned the sleeping talent” (*ibid.*, 196). MerleauPonty affirms that sleeping at night and being awake during the day are completely social events. However, the existence of continuous periods of sleep (or, rather, the need of them) is a completely organic event and will be the organic maturity that will allow us distinguish between one period and the other. This event will be, for Gesell, a determination or reliability (*sûreté*) factor for the organism.

Likewise, MerleauPonty raises the perception of geometric forms both in adults and in children. The perception of both, he affirms, differs remarkably, particularly in the recognition and discrimination of some features of the figure. The circle is the figure originated by the rotation of a segment of a line around a point. The question MerleauPonty makes himself is how it is operated – this conversion by which it goes from the perceived structure to the significance or the intelligible form. “The structure”, he declares, “is stuck with the significance provided by the science”, and “in the perceived circle (...) the whole is not independent from the sensitive *ipseity*”; “it is the science that releases significance” (*ibid.*, 204). In the naïf perceptive experience, the whole does not transcend the parts that conforms it. This is why even though adults cannot prevent identifying a centre within the circle, children do not have the same approach to the figure. Science has not yet printed its divisions, descriptions and concepts in the child’s perceptive act. This irruption of the science over the act of

5 The work referred in the section is *The embriology of behavior* that Gesell wrote in collaboration with Catherine Amatruda. See: Gesell, A., Amatruda, C. (1953), *L'embryologie du comportement : les débuts de la pensée humaine*, Paris, Presses universitaire de France.

perception itself, on the way we have of assessing, arranging and referring to the world, will be the background of the dialog that MerleauPonty will develop in *The world of perception. Seven Conferences*. In these radio conferences about perception, the childhood is that place where the biased vision of the modern science has not yet arrived. The child, same as the insane or the primitive, are the wild movement, indomitable, that just like in art, guards us from the universal view of scientificism that erases, with its uniformity impetus, the richness of an environment that provokes different (even opposite) views. Within the description of the world made by MerleauPonty, the child and the artist—as relevant figures that enrich the way we refer to our environment—come to rescue the colors that are released from a scent, the different tones of a melody and the time that drains in a landscape.

At the end, in works like *Phenomenology of perception*, the child is the image of full openness, of “going towards” characteristic of all individuals. The child is the significant potentiality that searches the sense among the others and that it is immerse in the pacific syncretism of the bodies that surround him. The harmony in which the children live from this lack of individuation (not only applied to the corporeality, but also to the thinking), make childhood an ideal of conviviality, a quasipolitical figure, diluted with the arrival of adolescence. The child is potentiality and, foremostly, a stronghold of wild thinking with which adulthood does nothing but forget, making an effort, with the entrance to rational thinking, to destroy.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the works of Maurice MerleauPonty, in which the phenomenologist provides a description of childhood or the child image that reports relevant aspects to his theory. The description of ‘childhood’ as a place inhabited by many places, as a primary silence or as that unspeakable, shows us childhood as the opening of a new field of experience and the institution of a new sense. Childhood will not only be a methodological object of interest in his psychology studies, but also a primal advancement of experience – the mere potentiality yet not thrown (or rather, having not yet been thrown) into the world where everything will, necessarily, have sense.

Keywords: MerleauPonty – childhood – expression – sense – perception

RESUMO

Este artigo explora algumas das obras de Maurice Merleau Ponty, nas quais o fenomenólogo fornece uma descrição da infância ou da imagem da criança que relata aspectos relevantes para sua teoria. A descrição da “infância” como um lugar habitado por muitos lugares, como um silêncio primário ou indizível, mostra-nos a infância como a abertura de um novo campo da experiência e a instituição de um novo sentido. A infância não será apenas um objeto metodológico de interesse nos seus estudos de psicologia, mas também um prenúncio primário primordial da experiência – a mera potencialidade ainda não lançada (ou melhor, ainda não jogada) no mundo onde tudo terá necessariamente sentido.

Palavraschave: MerleauPonty – infância – expressão – sentido